

OFFICIAL APPROVED
PAGE 5A

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Mondale says Beirut, arms race expose Reagan's flaws

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WASHINGTON — After months of seeking an issue that would strengthen his claim to the mantle of presidential leadership, Walter F. Mondale said yesterday that he thinks he has found not one, but two.

After his weekly radio broadcast, in which he attacked President Reagan for failing to reach an arms accord with the Soviet Union and for failing to guard against Mideast terrorists, Mondale said both issues "have exposed in a profound way" the President's shortcomings.

The Democratic presidential candidate said that Reagan had failed to "master the details" of foreign and national security policy and that the President "is not leading on the crucial questions" of arms control. Mondale also repeated his contention

that Reagan "is not answering questions" about his plans for a second term.

"That gives me a chance to contrast that with what I'm doing and proposing," Mondale said. "I believe I should win the leadership issue."

Mondale and his chief aides have been frustrated for months over polls indicating that voters rank Reagan ahead of Mondale in leadership qualities.

For a time, respondents to polls had a hard time choosing between the two when asked which would be more likely to achieve better relations with the Soviets. But beginning about two months ago, as the election campaign intensified, those polled have expressed more confidence in Reagan's ability to handle the Soviets and to conduct foreign policy.

Now, in the wake of the Sept. 20 suicide bombing of the U.S. Embassy annex near Beirut, and Reagan's meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko on Friday, Mondale said he believes that Reagan's leadership capabilities have been shown to be wanting.

In his radio speech yesterday, Mondale focused on both issues, charging that Reagan "acts as though terrorism is like an earthquake, a force of nature that can only be endured and not controlled."

As for Reagan's much-heralded meeting with Gromyko last week, Mondale said it apparently yielded little or no progress toward an arms agreement.

"What progress toward peace did Mr. Reagan make?" he asked. "The American people have seen the pictures and read the captions, but

when it comes to war and peace, that's not nearly enough."

After the radio talk, Mondale told reporters that "these latest developments have really exposed in a profound way to the nation what I've been trying to say" for months.

Charging that Reagan has "avoided the issues," Mondale said in his broadcast that "presidents can't substitute excuses for action."

Noting that American diplomats and Marines in Lebanon had been attacked and killed on two occasions before the latest bombing, Mondale said various American agencies and a special commission had recommended tighter security measures to discourage another attack.

"The truth is that the terrorists had publicly threatened an attack," Mondale added.

On the day of the bombing, he said,

Reagan said everything possible had been done to protect the embassy in Beirut. "Then why were there no guard gates?" Mondale asked. "Why weren't earth and steel reinforcements complete? Why had 80 Marines specially trained to protect our people been withdrawn?"

Reagan later "blamed the tragedy on previous administrations, which he said had weakened the CIA," Mondale said, terming the President's statement "false, misguided and dangerous."

The CIA, Mondale countered, was not weakened, "as Mr. Reagan's own vice president and CIA director have admitted."

"Presidential leadership," he added, "means being accountable for events that occur on your watch. There was not a failure of American intelligence; there was a failure to

use it wisely." Finally, Mondale said, Reagan's remark that American intelligence was weakened "invites further assaults."

On the arms control issue, Mondale said Reagan's meeting with Gromyko "was disappointing and a basis for apprehension" because "no apparent progress" was made and because it left voters in the dark about Reagan's real feelings toward improving relations with the Soviets.

Reagan spent the weekend at the presidential retreat in Camp David, Md. Today, he will begin a three-day campaign trip to Michigan, Mississippi and Texas.

Mondale's running mate, Geraldine A. Ferraro, was at home yesterday in Queens, N.Y., while Vice President Bush campaigned at a GOP picnic in Parma, Ohio.